

# The CRIMSON STAIN MYSTERY

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Novelized by ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE  
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## Chapter I.

### The Brand of Satan.

THE big Montrose house at Riverdale seemed to have awakened from a long dose of gloom. For six months it had been shuttered and all but deserted. Now its blinds were up. There were fresh flowers in the window boxes and on the deep veranda. There were new life and gaiety in the very atmosphere of the place.

For a half year Dr. Montrose had dwelt here alone, except for his silent, devoted assistant, Felix. Here, day and night, the doctor had toiled in his laboratory, tirelessly, perfecting the experiments to which he had devoted himself since his wife's death.

But now, in a breath, everything was changed. Florence, his 18-year-old daughter, had come home from a six-month visit to a school clinic in the West, and instantly her bright presence had restored the old house to its former brightness.

It was on the early evening of the third day after Florence's return to Riverdale. She was sitting alone on the veranda, when a man turned in at the gate and came hurrying up the long walk toward the house.

Florence's face flushed with genuine pleasure at sight of the visitor as he moved forward through the early summer twilight.

He was above middle height, graceful of figure and bearing, and wondrous good to look upon. His easy stride and the pose of his mighty shoulders proclaimed the athlete, even as the broad forehead and full eyes denoted the thinker and the firm-jawed jaw the man of action.

Florence ran down the steps to greet him.

"At last you have come," she eagerly exclaimed. "I had thought Harold Stanley had forgotten his schoolgirl friend in his busy career of doing nothing."

"Doing nothing!" he pouted. "I'm the busiest little citizen in a burg of 5,000,000 people."

"You certainly do surprise me. Why are you working? Has your father sent you off?"

"No. He's sent me on. On to the city roll of the New York Examiner. I have been there five months as a cub reporter. When I finished college dad had a real Dutch uncle talk with me. Among several hundred other remarks of general interest he said to me: 'Son, I've spent thirty years in building up the Examiner. I bought it when it was down and out. I've made it the most powerful newspaper in New York—perhaps in America. I did it for the sake of my only son. Now my only son can either be a loafer and squander the money I've earned or else he can take over his coat and pitch in and learn the business from the bottom up and make himself fit to carry on this great work when I am dead. Which shall it be? I leave the choice to you. So I pitched in. It seemed the only thing for a white man to do.'"

"Good for you!" applauded Florence. "I think it's the only way."

"The particular reporter," he answered, "has been spending most of his time, lately, in running his feet off, chasing false clues on the Crimson Stain Mystery."

"What on earth is the Crimson Stain Mystery? It has a gruesome sound."

"Here's the story in just a monthful of words," he explained. "Four months ago Cyrus Q. Ferrand—the banker, you know—was found murdered in his study. His wife was locked, and the murderer got clean away. The autopsy showed Ferrand had been choked to death."

"How horrible!"

"The odd feature of the case," went on Harold, "was the way he had been choked. The marks on his throat showed that the murderer's hands were long and slender and abnormally strong. Also, that his grip was one known to the jiu jitsu experts of Japan and to the Apaches of Paris. It is a peculiar hold. It paralyzes the victim's spinal cord and makes him helpless to resist; even while his breath is being shut off. It is a grip that not one strong arm man in ten thousand knows anything about. At least not in America."

"But, don't the police—"

"The police worked on the case for all they were worth. But they couldn't find a thing. Parritch—he's the great international detective that the city has hired to clear up this case—spent days in trying to get at a clew, but—"

"Spent days on it?" she interposed. "Why not weeks or months? Surely it was worth that much trouble. Why did he stop at 'days'?"

"Because," replied Harold, "nine days later Marcus Krug, the big jeweler, was found murdered in exactly the same way, in his private office at the back of his store."

"Two such murders in New York

in four months?" she murmured, with a shudder. "And no one brought to justice! It doesn't seem possible!"

"Two such murders!" he said in sudden vehemence. "No. Not two. Fourteen."

"Fourteen?" she gasped.

"Fourteen!" he repeated. "During the last four months no less than fourteen men of wealth in New York have been found strangled by just that weird throat grip. And in every case the murderer has escaped with his plunder."

"And no clew?"

"Yes and no. One clew, perhaps, but such a fantastic clew that we can't get any sense out of it."

"What is it?"

"When old Raoul Beaujolais, the restaurant man, was killed his brother found him a moment or two before he was quite dead. The murderer had been frightened away. As Beaujolais died he managed to pant out the words 'Crimson Stain'! That was all. Just those two words."

A cry of stark terror from Florence Montrose interrupted him. She had caught convulsively at his arm. With her free hand she was pointing wildly at a house they chanced to be passing.

Against one of these shades a strange group was silhouetted—a group of three figures.

One of these figures stood a little aloof from the two others, as if coldly directing operations. The remaining two were apparently locked in a death struggle.

Then Harold Stanley understood. One of these two men was strangling the other, who writhed helpless in his grip. The third was issuing directions for the murder.

"It's Mr. Hanna!" gasped Florence. "The great real estate operator up here. I recognize his profile. They're killing him. He—"

"Quick!" commanded Harold, shaking off his momentary daze of horror. "We must get a policeman on the block below. Run back and get him. Quick!"

He sprang away from her, vaulted the street hedge and crossed the narrow strip of lawn at a bound. With clenched fist he smote the heavy plate glass pane of the window. The pane shattered.

In through the broken window Harold thrust his body, heedless of the splintered glass that cut at his hands and face and rent his clothes.

As he set foot inside the pitch-dark room a pocket flashlight's rays smote blindingly athwart his eyeballs. At the same instant Harold's groping hand came in contact with a flimsy gilt chair. With all his might he hurled this ineffective missile at the white lens of the spotlight. The pocket lamp fell to the ground as though knocked from its holder's hand by the force of the chair's impact.

Almost at once Stanley's outflung arm brushed against the shoulder of a man who was stealing up toward him through the dense blackness.

Harold sprang in and grappled the unseen foe. The latter was a strong and active man, and fought with the fury of a cornered beast.

But it was not in vain that Harold Stanley had been accounted one of the most formidable football "tack-

lers" of his day. Against his swift skill the other's were brute strength was of little more avail than would have been a child's.

In less than five seconds of blind struggle he found the hold he sought. One tremendous heave and he had swung his invisible enemy clear of the floor and high in air. A second heave and the murderer went whirling through the room, bringing up with a rib-crushing impact against the farther wall.

Harold, panting from his exertion, spun about, with arms expanded, to grope for the second assassin. As he did so his foot struck the inertly quivering body of a man who lay sprawling on the floor in front of him.

With a thrill of revulsion Harold realized he had stumbled over the corpse of the strangled Hanna. He sought to recover his balance with a deft turn of his shoulders and a backward swing of his outstretched arms.

And some one seized him from behind.

A set of long, ice-cold fingers wrapped themselves about the young man's muscular neck, seeking and immediately finding the windpipe, just as two powerful thumbs began to press deep into the top of his spine,

directly below the base of the brain.

When the stunning effect of the blow passed he opened his eyes to find the room alight and full of people.

Florence Montrose and a policeman were bending over him. Servants and passers-by, attracted by the noise of battle, were thronging in. Harold started up, but he averted weakly from side to side, and would have fallen again but for the policeman's supporting arm. On the floor in front of him lay Hanna's dead body.

He drew the terrified girl from the room as he spoke and led her down the hall to the front door. On the threshold they almost collided with a man who was coming in. The newcomer and Harold recognized each other at a glance, even in that dim light.

"Hello, Parritch," said Harold, not over-cordially.

"Good evening, Mr. Stanley," returned the detective. "They told me at the station that there's been another Crimson Stain crime. Is—?"

"Yes," answered Harold. "That means the fifteenth in four months."

"This one is like all the rest, I suppose," hazarded Parritch. "Choked to death and no clew."

"No," contradicted Harold, with sudden elation. "There is a clew, this time. A real one. I've felt the murderer's hands around my own throat. And I've seen his eyes. And, he controlled, impressively, 'I know why old Mr. Beaujolais spoke of a 'Crimson Stain.' I've seen that stain.'"

"What?" cried both Parritch and Florence in a single breath.

"As I climbed into the front window," said Harold. "He switched off the light. But he turned an electric flash-lamp on me. The glare dazzled me and left him invisible. I threw a chair at the light and knocked it out of his hand. As it fell—before the air of hitting the floor released the battery-catch and put out the light—its rays fell for a fraction of a second on the upper part of his face."

"You recognized him?" cried Parritch.

"No. He was no one I had ever seen. I'm not sure I'd recognize the face again. But I'd recognize the eyes anywhere on earth."

"The eyes are red," answered Stanley. "A fiery crimson. As if they had been stained with blood. I believe that is what Beaujolais meant by the 'Crimson Stain.' He saw—"

"Bolt!" sneered Parritch, breaking into a roar of noisily derisive laughter. "That's the way with you amateurs—always imagining things and hunting up fancy clews. Crimson-stained eyes, hey? And you saw all that in the time it took a flashlight ray to flit across his face? It's the silliest drivel I ever heard."

In a roomy uptown building on New York's East Side lived Tanner. Outside of those who visited him at almost any hour of the day or night, he had practically no friends. Indeed, no one but those strange visitors had ever seen the interior of Tanner's quarters. Little was known of him among the building's tenants, for he seldom stirred outside his own suite. This was located on the lower floor to the rear of the building, and by means of a secret passageway was connected with an underground den.

On the night of the Hanna murder and an hour or so after the crime's discovery, several of these visitors drifted, one by one, into the den from

an alley entrance. All but one were men. The exception was Vanya Tosea, a woman who, for very obvious reasons, had long been named "the Vampire."

One man was evidently in high authority among the little group, to judge by the almost cringing deference bestowed on him by the rest. He was dark, sinuous, tigerish, with a strange and unforgettable face and with a gaze as hypnotic as a snake's. He claimed to be French by birth and called himself "Pierre La Rue." No one knew his real name.

"All here," he said, tersely. "Here's the report. Tanner and I went to Hanna's as we planned. We got in easily enough. Hanna was in the library alone. He was so old and feeble that I had decided to let Tanner do the job, instead of doing it myself. He'd been plaguing me to let him try the grip ever since I taught it to him. It was a false move. For, he bungled. They struggled all over the room, and they got between the light and the window shade. A man smashed in through the window and threw Tanner against the wall, crippling his shoulder. I got the grip on the fellow; and I was flushing him when I heard the police whistle. We shoved what cash we could find into the bag. Hand over, Tanner."

Dr. Montrose sat in his library late the following afternoon. From a drawer in his desk he had just taken a copy of the Examiner and had begun to read it, when a low rap sounded on the door. Almost guiltily, the doctor folded the paper and thrust it back into the drawer.

"Come in," he called.

Felix, his assistant—a crafty-eyed man of sly, servile mien—opened the door.

"It is—two of the 'experiment patients,' sir," stammered the servant. "I told them you had left word you couldn't see anyone today. But they won't go away. They say they—"

"Will see them," ordered Montrose, a shadow of physical pain distorting his care-scared face.

Dr. Montrose clasped his bowed head between his hands and groaned aloud. Then, rising to his feet, he squared his bent shoulders and a look of high resolve came into his haggard face. He crossed the library to the reception hall. The visitors were Vanya Tosea and Tanner. They stood eying Dr. Montrose with the look a hungry dog might bestow on a butcher's cart. They were dressed in loose and manner and seemed more than half ill.

"Well," Dr. Montrose sharply broke the momentary silence, "what do you want?"

"You know what we want, doctor," replied Tanner.

"And we must have it," added Vanya. "We must."

"You've both had far too much already," said Montrose in stern decision. "And you'll get no more."

At his words Vanya winced. Tanner's teeth began to chatter as if with a chill.

"You can't mean that, doctor!" exclaimed Vanya. "You can't refuse us! Please!"

"No!" reiterated Montrose. "You will neither of you get any more. I curse the day I first gave it to you. Today I read of still another murder—"

"Yes," said Tanner, eagerly. "I did that. I am La Rue. But it wasn't our fault. Not even Pierre La Rue's. It was yours. Yours! You're the cause of it—all of it."

"Yes," chimed in Vanya beseechingly. "And you can't take it away from us now. What would we be without it? What would we become?"

Montrose glared at them for an instant, then, with a hopeless sigh, surrendered. He motioned them across the laboratory of an intricate-looking machine at which they had been gazing with furtive longing ever since they entered the room.

Taking up two metal wrist clasps he fastened them about Vanya's wrists, then attached two more to Tanner's. The metal clasps were connected to long cylinders from whose other end a bunch of wires ran to the dynamo of the apparatus. Opening a valve at the top of each cylinder Dr. Montrose poured into the apparatus part of the colorless contents of a phial he produced from a wall cupboard.

His hand fell upon a lever. But he hesitated a moment before giving this lever the needful turn. Seeing his hesitation, the two patients snarled at him like angry beasts. Slowly the doctor thrust the lever into place. A bluish spark played along the cylinder wires.

The effect on Tanner and Vanya was miraculous. Their drooping bodies all at once became alert and vibrant with energy. The sudden dullness left their faces. Their eyes glared with an unnatural brightness.

Years of age seemed to have fallen away from them both. They appeared rejuvenated—almost glorified. Yet in the new vigor and glowing intelligence that encompassed them there was something hostile and inhuman; that turned Montrose's heart sick within him.

Dr. Montrose thrust back the apparatus into a space behind a sliding



With a thrill of  
revulsion Harold  
realized he  
had stumbled  
over the corpse  
of the strangled  
Hanna . . .  
And someone  
seized him  
from behind.  
A set of long  
and ice-cold  
fingers wrapped  
themselves  
about the young  
man's muscular  
neck—

OVERLOOKS

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door as if he hated it. Then he returned to his desk, took the diary from his pocket and recommenced his writing. (This is the entry he made in it.)

"June 22, 1914.—Gave Vanya and Tanner enough to last them twenty-four hours. Would to God they might never come back for more! I have done the world and my fellow men a great wrong. I pray that the end may be soon. When this diary shall be found after my death the truth will be known, and I hope shall be forgiven—forgiven for the fifteen deaths that indirectly were caused by me."

He laid aside his fountain pen. Idly he ran his fingers through the diary's pages as if searching for an earlier entry. Presently on the first page he found what he sought. Half aloud he read:

"Dec. 2, 1914.—At last my life work is crowned with success. All my former benefits to humanity will be as nothing to this. Today I have made the final test on the drug of my own compounding that will revolutionize all mankind, and I have discovered the only safe process for administering it. The formula for this drug will be found in my strong box in case of my death. Also a sketch of the apparatus for its electrical transmission into the human system."

"This compound of mine upholds the mind and stimulates the will; is the point of turning a mediocre intelligence into sublime genius. I believe I can administer it to a half-witted illiterate and transform him into a Shakespeare, a Napoleon or a Washington. No lifelong training and hereditary gifts of mind can make every faculty so alert and potent as can this drug I have evolved."

"Jan. 5, 1915.—Today I experimented on four hospital patients, chosen by me, at random, from various walks of life. I did not tell them the object of my experiment, but merely that it was a new electrical process which I believe would benefit the several ills of which they had complained to me."

"I tried the experiment on the four (the technical result will be found with the formula in my strong box) and the success went far beyond my wildest hopes. Their reaction was wonderful to note. All of the four brightened at once in looks and mental power. They seemed like members of a new and vastly superior race of men."

"Then I told them what I had done. Pierre La Rue's gratitude was pathetic. In him, more than in any of the others, the effect of the drug was astonishing. It has made another man of him. A wonderful man! I believe there are no heights to which I cannot raise him. He dominates them all (even myself—to my amusement and surprise). A remarkable genius!"

"The doctor sighed and turned to the next entry:

"March 22, 1915.—What abominable thing have I discovered? Where are the blessings I dreamed would be my priceless gift to mankind? Instead of heaven-inspired geniuses my drug has developed my four patients into the most dangerous, criminals. It has awakened and stimulated and intensified a hundred-fold the crime instincts of these four people on whom I have tried it. (Pierre La Rue is a devil!)"

"Moreover, Pierre La Rue, who has bent them all to his will, has done the same to me. When the drug is in his brain he is a peerless master of men. I cannot resist him. His will power crushes mine to do his bidding. I am as wax in his hands. If only I might die."

As Jerome Stanley and the doctor chatted, a light explosion was heard; Stanley left the room to investigate. He started up the stairs and toward the laboratory, from whence the sound came. He was passing through the upper hall when a long arm shot forth from behind the heavy curtained door and grasped his throat.

Stanley, at the touch, stood stock still, turning as pale as death. He did not look around, nor was any word spoken. There was a silent battle of wills. Montrose stood staring straight ahead of him in helpless despair.

Ten minutes later Florence rose from the piano.

"My dog Chic has learned a new trick! I'll show you," she exclaimed as she dashed from the library across the reception hall and into the dining-room.

Jerome Stanley lay across the table. Behind him crouched Pierre La Rue, his fingers encircling Stanley's throat. At sight of Florence the slayer loosened his hold and sprang back through a near-by doorway.

Jerome Stanley was stone dead. Regaining himself, Florence screamed, rushing forward past Florence, saw about the lifeless man's throat the hideously familiar finger marks of the Crimson Stain's victims.

"Dad!" he called wildly, dropping on his knees beside his father, "Dad!"

Robert Clayton, rushing out to aid, encountered Dr. Montrose cowering downstairs.

"Doctor!" yelled the artist. "Stanley is dead! Murdered!"

Harold Stanley bent slowly to his feet and looked down at the father he had so devotedly loved. Then, solemnly as though he were repeating a vow before a priest, he raised his hand and said, without the faintest sign of emotion:

"I will find and punish my father's murderer if I have to track him to the farthest ends of the earth. I help me, God!"

Dr. Montrose thrust back the apparatus into a space behind a sliding

(END OF CHAPTER I.)